

"Stinkers"

an original comedy by
Stephen Arthur

TREATMENT for
Screenplay

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**2020 sxarthur@shaw.ca
604-926-9787 Vancouver BC**

"Stinkers"-- TREATMENT for 120 page screenplay.

In claustrophobic darkness, ROGER (32) grunts and belly-crawls through mud and around pipes and air ducts searching with his flashlight for the source of a tapping sound: "It's not down yet!"

We MOVE UP right through the floorboard over Roger's head and into a rich but tacky home. An absurd family drama is in progress, strained by the group of intruders who are tearing their house apart to install a "Protectronic Security" computerized burglar alarm system. BOB is jamming a long drill bit up and down in a hole in the sideboard. We hear a stifled "Got it!" from down below, and yards of wire start snaking down the hole.

Bob (33) is the manager of the local division of Protectronic in this medium sized California town. He's blatantly self-centered; a braggart; who advises without listening; who's always on top of things-- "it's a piece of cake"-- and obsessed with technological control. He's a Nam vet, and probably would enjoy doing that trip again some time-- "Let's blow this sucker out and haul ass!" He's dynamic-- the kind of guy who'll say "I'll tell you one thing about that...", and if all eyes don't turn he'll start over till they do-- and that's enough to earn the respect of his workers and clients. Except for Roger: to Roger, Bob is just a jerk.

Roger is a sensitive guy. He's a burnt-out ex-school teacher; a little cynical, drained, irritated. He's unassertive, but at the same time he won't take any shit-- a combination that puts some people, like Bob, off guard, and Bob in fact has little use for Roger except that he does a good job.

Throughout the film, contrasting and parallel actions between the rich, clean homes and "behind the scenes" in the crawl spaces, wall passages, and attics will be developed to the hilt, perhaps showing both simultaneously.

Evening-- Roger parks at the condominium he lives in on an undeveloped, bushy hillside. He winces as he opens the car door and holds his nose. We soon realize from the comic contortions of the others in the condo that there's a terrible smell of skunk driving them all slowly nuts. Two couples are moving out because of it.

At their nightly block meeting we learn that the smell (which the Health Inspector says is harmless) was started a month ago by a refining plant down the hill from them. The "nuisance" ordinance had been accidentally negated by another ordinance and so the condo had to find people to sign a petition for a new ordinance (even the Plant's assistant manager signed it) and have been waiting with strained patience for the City Council meeting due in a few days.

The condo owners have little in common, except for their frustration and a sense of powerlessness and victimization even stronger than Roger's. They've worked and saved hard to buy their own homes and can't afford to move at today's prices. The only energetic one amongst them is a simple-minded buffoon, MARK, who is lucky enough to have no sense of smell.

We see Roger alone in his apartment and get another taste of his character.

Cut to local Rotary Club dinner-- exiting are LEAH, an attractive college senior out for the summer, and her long-standing fiancé, HAROLD, a dull fast-food-chain junior manager. Leah is a mystery to us at first because, although her parents have straight-jacketed her to their values and taught her to be shy and self-conscious, there is a passionate, self-motivated, unique woman beneath all that, ready to break free. And poor Harold is about to be one of the first things to be discarded. He is to drop her off at the Plant to pick up some secretarial work, and she wants to walk home from there, alone.

She has a keen wit and Harold keeps missing her ironic comments, until, finally, she's made such a fool of him that he gets the point-- she's sick of him and doesn't want to see him again, and to hell with her parents' wishes. In nervous exhilaration, she leaves the devastated Harold in the air conditioned parking garage.

Outside the Plant's main entrance Roger is standing in the shadows with earplugs shoved up his nostrils, watching the fumes from the chimney. Leah exits and at the first whiff of the anticipated stink, breaks into a run-- springing back as she almost hits Roger. A moment of tension till Roger remarks, "You must be one of the Stinkers," and she's gone.

Next morning, an emergency meeting in the condo: A letter from the Council says that the new ordinance proposal must be read at two meetings before it can be passed; the second meeting not being for another month. And to top that, one of the condo guys is a janitor at City Hall and knows that there won't be a quorum that month because most of the councilmen go duck hunting then.

Now they're desperate. They talk of blowing up the Plant or kidnapping the Plant Manager, but it's all just pitiful hot air. Several more of them decide to leave. Mark is full of bravado and says he's going to see the Plant Manager. To keep him from doing god-knows-what, Roger goes with him.

At the Plant we see BROWN the Manager, a driven and narrow-minded old man, conducting the floor operations like a military maneuver. Leah is Brown's secretary; and in his office she watches, intrigued, as Mark and Roger confront him.

Brown feels justified in continuing the process that makes the smell, and he's confident that he'll win legally because of other technicalities and his good lawyers. Roger and Mark make an entertaining show trying to play on Brown's compassion-- but he has none. He's obsessed with the perfect economy and efficiency of his new process; with his unsurpassed performance record; and with all the hard work he's put in. He actually expects sympathy from Roger and Mark. But most of all, when he makes a decision, he sticks to it. "How can I possibly turn back now? Why, just look at this graph-- see how perfectly symmetrical these bars are? No other way of doing it that isn't messy-- just, very messy. Surely you understand."

Roger is appalled. He notices Leah for the first time, just as he's parting with a cutting remark that Brown takes as giving in.

Saloon-- Roger and Mark drink like comrades. If only there was something Roger could do, he'd do it, just to affirm his own convictions.

Parking lot-- they see Leah get into a car with Brown. They follow, eventually passing the condo and climbing the scrubby hill to the rich area on top, stopping at a large tudor house. Enter... lights on in an upstairs bedroom... lights off again. Aha! They've got something on Brown-- sexual coercion! (Good jobs are hard to keep in this town.) But what if she's doing it willingly? With an old creep like that-- no way! Roger notices a "Protectronic Security" sign on the door, and he's getting ideas... what the hell, he's got nothing to lose.

Next day-- Bob is with Roger's crew again wiring a house. We get another view of how these guys work, and how they fool around when the owners are out. Roger gets Bob aside: Bob is the only one with the technical knowledge to break into their alarm systems, and it happens that he owes Roger a big favour (Roger saved his life once, maybe). Roger asks Bob to help him break in to Brown's house so he can take candid photos for blackmail. Bob sneers at first, but Roger presses the point, and although he resents such a

request, Bob feels compelled to stick to his own peculiar honour system-- "You're really gonna hold me to this, huh? Well then, I got no choice." He brags of how he could break into a house, make himself coffee while the owners were in the next room, and leave without a trace. But he thinks Roger will screw up for sure, so he decides to go in with him and show him a real pro at work.

Weekend-- Bob visits Brown for a phoney service call, to "case" the house. Brown was an officer in World War II, and both he and Bob are in the reserves now. Brown has a high regard for Bob, as a fellow veteran and as a man who's got things under control. And Bob admires Brown; seems fascinated by him, even; wants to share his secrets. Bob is all up on the facts and stories about conspiracies by the CIA and the military-industrial complex and all. He pries at Brown to talk of his chemical warfare work in the reserves. Brown: "Oh, well, you know actual weapons research was banned in 1969, we don't do any of that--" Bob: "Oh sure, gotcha...", tongue-in-cheek, waiting for more: but Brown won't confide in him, it seems. We sense that Bob's feelings border on resentment, jealousy, or rivalry. As Bob leaves, Brown mentions proudly that the Army wants him to enlist as a technical advisor, and he'd like to (civilian life being so messy; no respect for authority or regulations) but the job involves extended travel and so he turned them down.

Night at Brown's-- Roger stands guard while Bob deactivates the crawlspace hatch sensors. Then there's friction over Bob carrying a gun, just before they squeeze into the hatch, continuing through the crawlspace, up through a space behind the stairway, and into the attic to set up "peep holes" to spy from. The attic is filled with fluffy pink insulation, and they must move painfully slowly to avoid noise or stepping off the supporting beams onto the thin ceiling.

From Roger's peep hole he can see Leah in a bedroom, arguing with Brown. It turns out that in fact Brown is Leah's uncle. Her parents both died a year ago and her inheritance is being held by Brown (since only he can sign to prove she's the benefactor) until he feels she's learned the salient points of life as he sees them, and is then ready to be on her own. She resents him but has not found enough strength yet to challenge his rigid, obsessive manner. And she's stuck as his secretary for the summer.

So much for the blackmail plan. Brown leaves and Roger watches her in private. She plays her guitar a bit, haltingly composing the first two lines of a sad, romantic song. By this point, Roger has been overcome with feelings for her-- he's in love. Now she stands before her mirror, acting out a private

fantasy with herself. Roger feels ashamed now of his invasion of her privacy and wants to leave, but Bob has arrived and taken over the peep hole. Roger tells him it's no go, but Bob is riveted to the hole, starting to relay lustful descriptions of Leah undressing in front of the mirror, and swearing that he's got to get this chick for himself. Roger can't stand this and struggles with Bob to get him away. The scuffle escalates, Roger insults Bob, and suddenly Roger drops into the sea of pink fluff as his leg breaks through the ceiling-- a scream from below!-- Bob pushes at Roger till he falls completely through, crashing down onto Leah's bed.

Her scream stops as she recognizes Roger, who, in a terrified daze, tries to calm her and explain his mistaken intentions.

Meanwhile Bob weasels his way out under the house.

Roger is pitifully ridiculous and Leah seems intrigued, almost amused, as Brown and his SERVANT bang on the door and Roger leaps out her window.

On a side road down the hill towards the condo, the Servant catches Roger, who protests that he was out jogging and lives nearby. The police arrive and arrest him.


Leah is questioned by the police. She tells them she clearly saw the intruder, and that the alarm system had been turned off at the time. A search reveals nothing-- Bob had covered their tracks.

Police Station next day-- Leah looks over a lineup of men that includes Roger, and she says it was definitely not any of them. She admits she does recognize Roger because he had met with Brown, and that in fact she has some news to discuss with him.

They release the relieved Roger and the two meet together. Roger feels defeated, but excited by Leah, whose passion and courage have emerged during these events. She sympathizes and is even willing to help him against Brown. Her sharp optimism plays against his cynical dejection. Even stronger is the amorous undercurrent; the air between them seems charged.

Bob calls Roger to his office and fires him, ostensibly because of the company's image.

Bob visits Brown, who is furious that this "infallible" system has been broken into-- he knows it was turned on. Bob insists that only a bonded Protectronic employee could have gotten in, so it must have been Roger (who Brown never saw and so does not connect with the condo problem). Roger has been fired and the code for the house changed, so Brown is pacified. But then why would Leah cover for Roger? Brown trusts Bob, so he suspects Leah of something, and all this confusion makes him



very tense. (As the story continues his tension shows itself through increasingly compulsive pickiness over trivial matters, and by a growing obsession with orderliness.)

Brown leaves and Leah arrives. She delays Bob to plead with him to keep Roger on. She soon senses what a jerk Bob is and plays up to his self-image with all her coy charm, subtly trying to help "poor innocent Roger", as a favour to her. Bob gets her to go out with him to a cabaret, and the more the charade continues the trickier Leah has to be and the more of a fool Bob makes of himself. He finally takes her home-- he won't re-hire Roger, but he's convinced she's in love with him. She's totally repulsed. Bob feels like hot stuff but just before he drives off, Brown arrives and, "officer to officer", advises him that Leah is already engaged to a man sanctioned by her poor late parents (Harold), and so he expects Bob will not see her again. With this blocking him, Bob wants Leah more than ever.

At the condo-- the smell is even worse. The kids play hopscotch wearing gas masks. Leah and Roger meet with those that are still left, who are really moved by the story of the risks that both Leah and Roger took. There's a new sense of community and motivation among them now. As they pool their resources and skills, looking for an angle, it's brought out that Brown treasures his house and would hate to leave it, so maybe they could give him some of his own medicine. But-- it's impossible to collect the gas from the Plant.

Later-- Roger and Leah are getting romantic and playful at a private spot of hers in the woods, the mouth of "The Talking Tunnel", a huge disused aqueduct that reverberates their words. Roger has rebounded from the loss of his job, and right now he feels like he could rebound from anything. They do some impromptu humming and whistling into the tunnel, improvising together. Roger starts the two lines of the song he had heard Leah composing, and together they make up the rest of it, turning a song of romantic tragedy into one of rebellious comedy. They are one with each other. Hopeful; almost manic. And suddenly Leah has an idea--

Cut to Leah, Roger, and a professional ANIMAL TRAINER: "You want a skunk trained to stink on command?"

From this follows a farcical sequence with the condo people out in the woods, nervously trying to train a small spotted skunk to follow voice commands about where to go and when to spray. It's frantic and frustrating, but every bit of progress is exhilarating and the skunk is surprisingly smart. The

funniest thing is that when it sprays it actually does a handstand, back legs spreadeagled in the air. (That's really how they do it.)

Mark (no sense of smell) gets sprayed accidentally and everyone goes through contortions to get away from him when he gets too caught up in the excitement to remember that he smells. And mixed with all this slapstick is the tender, but necessarily awkward and humorous romance between Roger and Leah.

Finally the electronics guy in the group unveils his specially designed earplug-receiver for the skunk. It now responds to commands from a walkie-talkie, and only from Roger's voice.

The skunk at work-- with Roger commanding from the woods nearby (calculating the skunk's progress on a map) and with Mark helping out and keeping watch, the entire hillside and Brown's property are reeking with skunk smell.

But to our surprise, Brown simply denies smelling it. Instead he becomes more driven by his work; more uptight about the smallest thing out of order-- his coat on the wrong hanger, the dinner served five minutes late; and suspicious to the point of paranoia about everything Leah says or does.

They try the program for several days, but no reaction. The poor-quileless Servant is frazzled by Brown's demands; by the smell; and by Leah's quick-thinking to keep him from discovering the skunk. And through all this, Bob is calling Leah, and trying to see her when Brown is out. In the highly charged state she is in, Leah plays with his desires-- since the guy's too blind to take a hint anyway-- coyly tantalizing him more and more.


Roger tries another approach. He gets the skunk to climb a tree, cross on the limb, and enter the attic air conditioner vent. In moments the house is filled with the stench. Brown is startled, turns off the air conditioner, locks himself in his study. Soon it's sweltering inside and Brown turns the air conditioner on again, bringing back the smell. He can't suppress it any more. Leah walks by wearing a gas mask and he rips it off her to use for himself. "This cannot continue!" he makes military gestures, "Unless there is a way to stop this immediately, I shall be forced to take upsetting actions!" Leah recommends an ecologist who could determine the extent of the problem-- an ecologist who lives in the condo, VICTOR, who is ready for this moment. Brown calls him to come and make tests right away.

At a bar-- Roger, Leah, and all the condo people celebrate their tentative victory: he's falling for it! Roger announces he and Leah are engaged.

But Bob has tracked Leah to the bar. He butts in and takes over the conversation with his car-salesman's manner, expecting to take Leah away with him. She's clearly with Roger but Bob ignores the fact; he won't take no for an answer, and even makes insulting remarks about Roger. The whole group is uneasy and Leah is fed up-- she tells him off in front of the whole bar, wounding his pride badly. He leaves in a fury-- he's dangerous now.


Bob at home: methodically cleaning his gun collection, realigning his laser sight, assembling his sub-machine gun, practicing his karate, synchronizing his watches. He goes to his Protectronic files and pulls out Roger's fingerprints.

Quick shot-- Bob buying a made-to-order, one-hour-service, rubber stamp of the thumb print.

Next thing we know: Bob is wriggling through the dark crawlspace again, right under Brown's feet. In the attic is the top of Brown's wall safe. Bob unbolts a plate on the top and takes out a manila envelope of classified military papers. Then he blots the thumbprint stamp on a pad of grease and stamps it on the inside of the safe. 

Next day-- Brown returns home from his part-time duties in the reserves, still wearing his uniform, along with his gas mask, and enters his study to put another file into his safe.

Cut to: All hell breaking loose-- Brown in uniform and mask raving to the cops, telling them his suspicions about that Protectronic guy (Roger), and of Leah, too. Leah running for cover. And the cops: "I'll never figure how guys smart enough to get in and out can be dumb enough to leave fingerprints." (And almost instantly they've verified the print as Roger's.)

Leah at Roger's apt.-- She's coming apart; she suspects Roger really is a thief. Some tense drama convinces her he's not, but by now she's regressing to her old frightened self: they went too far; they're done for; their futures, their love, all ruined; she shouldn't have got out of line. But Roger is more ready than ever to fight. He knows Bob must have framed him out of revenge, and he must hide quickly from the police-- where would they never look for him? Right back at the very scene of the crime, under Brown's house. Now it's up to Leah.  She must convince Bob to return the files-- work on his ego-- then while he's inside the house they'll call the police on him. Bob is the only person who could break in to the house so they must prove that he is the thief. Roger works on Leah's courage, hopes she'll pull it off, and leaves to sneak in under Brown's house while the alarm is off.

The condo people give the police false leads.

From the dark foreboding bowels of the house, Roger listens to the sounds above and watches the garden through an air vent.

Now come Victor, the ecologist, and Mark in a ridiculous disguise as his assistant, to make their tests of the smell problem.

They make a comical show of it with an array of bizarre instruments, crazy jargon, and slapstick antics at Brown's expense as he tries to talk to them. Victor is fast-talking beyond belief-- he can use a whole sentence the way the rest of us use a comma-- and he's running verbal rings around Brown, who's still in uniform and becoming more and more mechanical in his actions and talking like a broken record.

At Bob's house-- it's super tense as Leah, getting into her best acting yet, asks Bob's forgiveness. He's cold and mean at first. She talks of how she really had fallen for him but had been afraid he was too much of a man for her. He warms to this, and his need for revenge softens. He finally admits that he stole the papers.

At Brown's-- Victor and Mark are inside with Brown as Victor explains his calculations: they show why the smell is collecting up here; why there's no way to stop it; how it will keep getting worse, becoming toxic soon, and spilling over into neighbours' property. Mark knocks something over, and the Servant keeps nervously appearing with news of complaints from the neighbours, while Brown, as commandingly as he can, tries to refute Victor. But neither seems to be listening to the other.

Under the house-- the smell program must continue and Roger is directing the skunk, by walkie-talkie, to go to the air conditioner vent again, busily marking the skunk's progress on a diagram. But it happens that if a skunk's familiar landscape is changed it will become disoriented. Victor's equipment in the yard has thrown the skunk off course. Instead of reaching the tree, it stops just below the open window where Victor and Brown argue.

Roger below commands: "Climb... climb..." Inside we see the skunk appear on the ledge right behind Brown. Brown has been saying "And furthermore I wish you would stop this reference to skunk smell! I know what a skunk smells like and this is not a skunk smell!" Victor starts in again. Brown swivels in his chair and stares directly at the skunk. "Aha!" Victor and Mark freeze-- Brown swivels back: "You said--", and he's back into the argument, so self-absorbed that he didn't see the skunk.

Roger below commands: "In... in..."

Back to Bob's-- Leah has coaxed him into his fullest delusions of grandeur. She will give her-

self to him-- but first, would he return the papers, for the sake of poor, pitiful Roger? She doesn't have the combination so he'll have to break in again. Sure thing-- "Piece of cake."

Back to Brown, standing at his desk in a controlled frenzy, still confronting the confounding Victor. And under his desk-- the skunk.

Roger below, looking at the air conditioner on his diagram, commands: "Stink... stink..."

Whamo! A direct hit on Brown's leg. Brown goes nuts, runs like a lunatic out of the room and locks himself in his study. Victor and Mark rush the skunk out.

Outside-- Bob waits as Leah goes in, gets a quick briefing from Victor on his way out, then speaks to Roger from the basement-- it's working! Bob is returning the papers! Brown has cracked! Roger crawls out to hide in the woods and Leah signals Bob to break in.

Brown on the phone, through his gas mask: "I don't care about the cost-- I want it done now! That's an order!"

Behind the walls, Bob opens the safe, returns the papers, and starts out again.

Inside, Leah opens the safe (she does know the combo) and takes out both the old and new papers and hides them.

Brown meets Leah, who practically faints from his smell as he announces, "I've taken action!"

Out in the woods-- Leah to Roger: "Bob's leaving-- where's the police?" And secondly, "You're not going to believe this-- the bastard has decided to move the house!"

Oh, shit. Everything is failing. For now all they can do is try to stall Bob.

Bob in the attic-- he hears noises from Leah's bedroom and looks in the peep hole. She's getting undressed, right near the hole. He can't pass this up.

Outside-- half a dozen house-movers with their hydraulic jacks have arrived. Brown meets them: "Never mind disconnecting the pipes and wiring-- rip them out! That's an order!"

Bob in the attic-- Leah pretends she's in private, of course, but she's stripping in a calculated, erotic way, always chancing to turn away at just the wrong moment for Bob. He's getting really excited, oblivious to all else-- her panties are about to go down...! Suddenly a terrible cracking sound and the house shakes and starts to tilt to one side!

And now the police have finally arrived. They call to him with a bullhorn. Bob is terrified-- he's trapped! The shit's hit the fan! Combat time!

Outside-- the cops are sprayed with bullets from inside the attic. An absurd shootout follows as Bob worms his way around the house. Finally he breaks into the livingroom, sub-machine gun ready. Brown appears: "Bob! Who's the enemy? What do they want? Quickly we can escape this way--" But Bob has turned his gun toward Brown. Deadly pause. The police burst in. Bob is captured.

The police explain to Brown and take him to the safe where he discovers both files missing now. This is the last straw for Brown-- Bob, of all people! The only one he trusted! Deception and subversion everywhere! Nothing is under control!

Brown starts ordering everyone around-- the cops, the house-movers, the Servant-- forcing them to line up and walk in single file. As a last chance, Leah and Roger play on his crazed state, to break him. Leah brings Roger in, announces her engagement, and insists on getting her inheritance back right now. Roger meanwhile slips the files under Brown's arm while he's distracted. Shocked to discover the files, now he's not even sure about himself. He orders the Servant to pack his things and hire armed guards for the house, then signs Leah's papers: "Here's your money. I expect you out of here when I return."

At the Plant-- Brown has shut down the process but he still smells it (on himself) and in a rage orders the workers to tear down the machinery as though they were attacking a Nazi bunker. He resigns from the company, and leaves in charge the assistant, who had signed the condo's petition long before.

At the Army-- lots of official fanfare as Brown is sworn in. The C.O. makes a private call to the wastelands of Arizona.

Cut to: one mile below the surface of the desert-- a three man operation for methodically and tediously deactivating nerve gas toxins. The haggard C.O. of this operation comes to the phone and removes his gas mask to hear: "Good news! I've finally got you a replacement." The C.O. is too burnt out and stir crazy to even register his relief. He's been there six months straight.

At the condo-- a celebration party in full swing. Everyone awaiting Roger and Leah. Outside, a cat paws at the skunk's cage.

Inside, a moment later-- zip! A reeking cat streaks through the party. The guests move en-mass out to the patio. Someone brings over the skunk cage and they toast the skunk. They'll tolerate this little friend even if he does stink.

At Brown's house, Roger and Leah slip romantically upstairs for a private interlude before they join the party at the condo. On the way up, they forget to de-activate the electric eye before they pass by it.

Ext. the party, in long shot, as a Protectronic Security Armed Neighbourhood-Watch Patrol car flashes by and winds its way up the hill in the distance, toward the sound of the alarm, which until this moment we've never heard.

Accompanying the CREDITS is the theme song that Leah and Roger had composed.

end